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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON ISAF PLAN TO PROVIDE CELLULAR TELEPHONE SERVICE  
FROM FORWARD OPERATING BASES IN AFGHANISTAN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Embassy and ISAF are working together to provide cellular telephone services from Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) located in RC-South and RC-East. In RC-East, commercial providers will have the opportunity to build towers on or near FOBs under a pilot program. In RC-South, ISAF plans to contract an American provider to construct a separate towers-on-wheels network that will provide service to Afghan and U.S. Government officials as well as PRT personnel. The RC-South plan, pending COMISAF approval, will allow private telecommunications companies to provide commercial service through the towers. End summary.

RC-East: Commercial Towers on U.S. FOBs  
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¶2. (SBU) ISAF has offered to allow Roshan, Afghanistan's largest telecom company, to build a pilot tower on or near FOB Paktika by the end of 2009. ISAF chose Paktika for its lack of cellular coverage, the provincial government's engagement on this issue and the tenuous local security situation. Under the proposed pilot, ISAF would provide residual security and Roshan would pay all other costs for the tower's construction and upkeep.

¶3. (SBU) After a two-month trial period, Roshan and ISAF will evaluate whether the tower's presence on the FOB results in increased threats to Roshan's personnel and infrastructure. Post will provide logistical support to Roshan's survey team and interface with the Paktika governor. If the pilot program is successful, ISAF and Roshan will consider further sites in RC-East. While Roshan has expressed interest in initial, exclusive use of new sites, Post will coordinate with ISAF to propose similar pilot programs to other providers to ensure competitive access to the FOBs. If the pilot is successful, the program may expand to FOBs throughout Afghanistan.

RC-South: Towers-on-Wheels  
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¶4. (SBU) Attackers have destroyed dozens of cellular towers in the south during 2009 to pressure cellular providers to turn off their towers overnight. This challenging security situation requires a different approach from the one applied in the more stable RC-East. In this RC, ISAF plans to establish a secure government wireless network managed under the auspices of government-owned Afghan Telecom. The network would be primarily dedicated to emergency response and as a command and control system for Afghan government and military and security personnel. Due to Department of Defense funding restrictions, ISAF will not own the towers, but will lease them from a vendor on a one-year basis with a renewal option. This contractor (most likely a U.S. company) will provide maintenance and technical support and its staff will live and work on selected FOBs.

Because of the technological and logistical complexities involved, U.S. military planners believe only a U.S. company will be able to provide these services under Afghan Telecom's name. This service should help to increase government legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

¶5. (SBU) Commercial cellular providers, as well as television and radio networks, would be able to rent space on the towers from the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) for their equipment, thereby providing commercial services to the surrounding population. (Note: USFOR-A is seeking a legal opinion on this possibility. End note)

¶6. (SBU) Since ISAF will only support the towers-on-wheels as long as coalition forces need them, a handover plan is crucial for the program's sustainability. Post is exploring different funding options to purchase the towers and donate them to the Afghan Government and/or local communities when ISAF no longer needs them. We estimate the buyout cost at \$4 to \$5 million, depending on the number of towers. This figure does not include maintenance expenses, which would increase the cost significantly.

¶7. (SBU) ISAF is conducting a detailed assessment and cost analysis, which it plans to complete by the end of October. COMISAF is expected to approve the proposal by the end of November, followed by a tender process and transport of the towers. The towers could be operational in RC-South in the spring of 2010. We are not yet certain of the number of towers to be installed because COMISAF has not yet approved the initiative and its budget.

¶8. (SBU) Post and ISAF plan to meet jointly with Minister of Communication and Information Technology Sangin to discuss relevant details of this plan.

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